

Species

33 new ant species from Central America and the Caribbean

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Scientists have discovered 33 new species of monstrous-looking predatory ants in Central America and the Caribbean. A new ant species, referred to as 'mini-monsters' by Utah scientists, were named after Mayan lords and demons. The entomologist Jack Longino, a professor of biology at the University of Utah said; these new ant species are the stuff of nightmares when viewed under a microscope. Their faces are broad shields, the eyes reduced to tiny points at the edges and the fierce jaws bristling with sharp teeth. They are smaller than a grain of rice and live in the rotting woods of the forest. The ant's jaws open and close sideways instead of up and down. The new species were found mostly in small patches of forest that remain in a largely agricultural landscape, highlighting the importance of forest conservation efforts in Central America. They are nearly eyeless and crawl around in leaf litter using primitive compound eyes to detect light but not form images. The more notable new ant species names include *Eurhopalothrix hunhau*, which is a major Mayan god of death and a master of the underworld, and *Eurhopalothrix xibalba*, meaning "place of fear". Ants are one of the big elements of ecosystems, like birds and trees. They are major movers of stuff. Some act as predators and influence the population sizes of other insects by eating them. They gather a lot of dead insects and eat them, so they are like vultures at a microscale. They move seeds around and have a big impact on what kind of plants grow where. They aerate soil and do a lot of excavation. Having aerated soil is good for plants -- it lets oxygen get into the soil and water percolate through it better. The adult ants eat only liquids, not solid food. So they bring their prey back to the nest, where it is eaten by ant larvae, which regurgitate it so it can be consumed by the adults. Most modern ants no longer are predators, some of which use venoms to sting their prey, but instead are scavengers like those that pick up crumbs off kitchen floors, and spray formic acid to fight off other ants.

REFERENCE

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